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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet is designed to help parents help their children make the short but important step from language play to loving writing. The pamphlet discusses ways to: encourage children's curiosity and imaginative play; make reading an important part of family life; and respect children's interests in writing and reading. It also suggests imaginative ways to write for school and for fun. (RS)

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FROM WORDS TO STORIES

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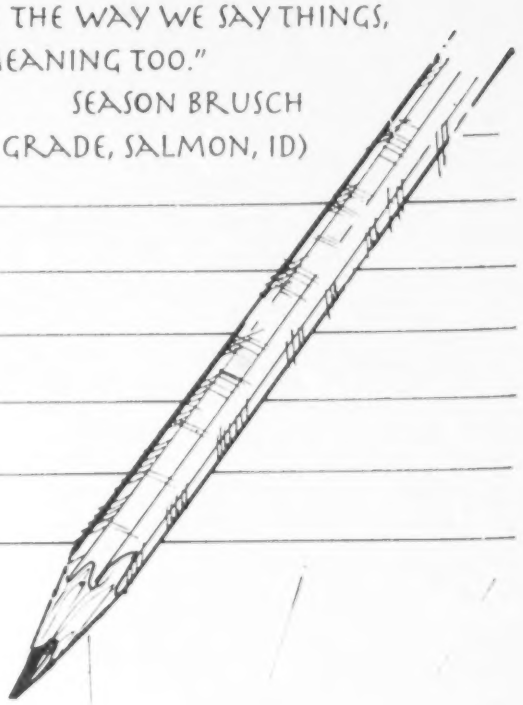
"LETTERS ARE LITTLE PEOPLE
WITH TINY BRAINS, THINKING OF
WHAT SOUND TO MAKE NEXT.
SOME REBEL AND REMAIN SILENT,
CHANGING THE WAY WE SAY THINGS,
AND THE MEANING TOO."

SEASON BRUSCH
(7TH GRADE, SALMON, ID)



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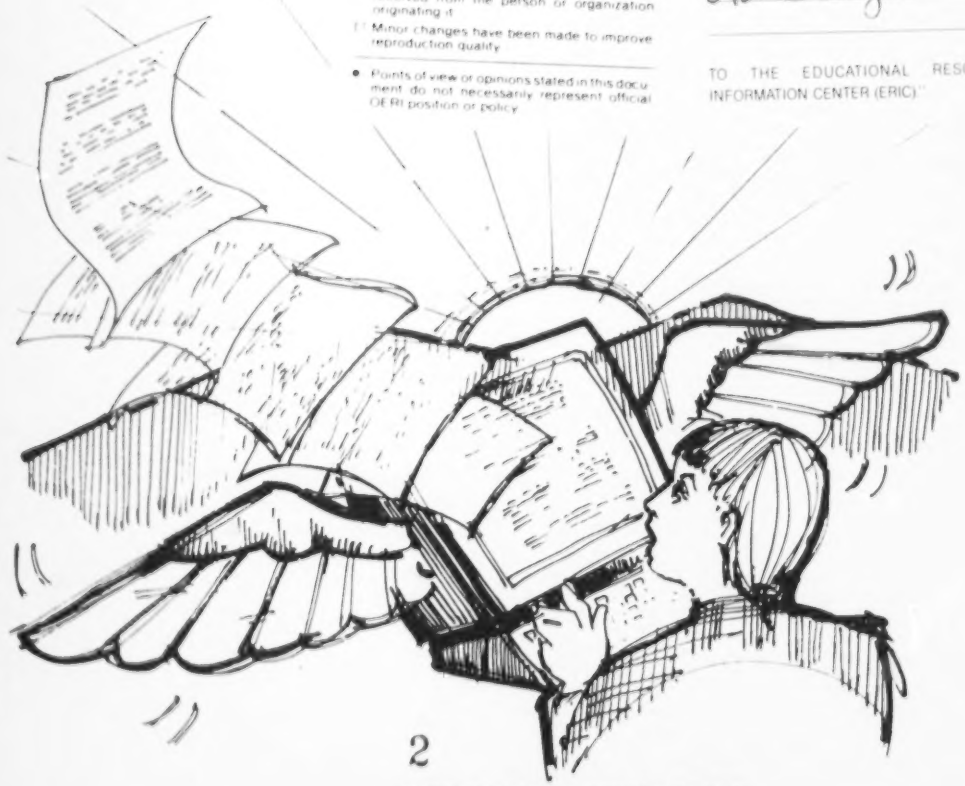

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All young children love to play with words. They love to make jokes and puns, sing songs, invent names and listen to and tell stories. It is a short step from loving such language play to loving writing.

You can help your child make that short but important step:

- Encourage your child's curiosity and imaginative play.
- Make reading an important part of your family life.
- Respect your child's interests in writing and reading.
- Suggest imaginative ways to write for school and for fun.

Preparing Your Child for Writing

Your family's attitudes and habits can make learning to write natural and fun for your child rather than hard and frustrating. You can lay a firm foundation for future writing by reading and telling stories to your child; by letting your child know that you, too, enjoy and learn from books; by respecting your child's curiosity and imagination.

Reading and listening to stories help make writing easier. Children who read or hear stories regularly develop a natural understanding of how sentences, ideas and narratives work, and so have a much easier time later when these skills are "taught" to them in school. Reading can also make your child more eager to write. Just as young sports fans long to go out onto the playing fields, so children who love reading want to make up their own stories and poems.

Here are three ways to prepare your child for writing:

1. Read aloud to your children, even when they are very little. When you read aloud, children get not only a good story but also a moment of intimacy with you that adds to their good feeling about books and writing. Also, the fact that you take the trouble to read shows that you respect the written word. Keep reading aloud even after children can read on their own. You can read more advanced books than your child is reading, or return to old favorites together. As children listen, they come to see that different kinds of writing have different effects on us.

2. Encourage children to read by taking them to the library. Give books as presents. Be patient. Don't worry if at first your child is interested only in comics. Children who enjoy reading simple books will move on to more mature ones.

3. Answer your children's questions and listen to their stories. If children think that you don't care about what they say, they will not feel confident about expressing themselves, aloud or on paper. Also, your explanations help them understand how to organize their own thoughts.

Writing with children helps them learn to organize their ideas and stories and to think of themselves as authors. Here are a few ways to have fun "writing" with children who can't yet write on their own.

"Tell me a story." Ask your child to tell you a story. Write it down as it is told. Don't worry if you are a slow writer. While waiting for you to finish copying a line, your child will be thinking about what happens next in the story. If your child loses track of the story, you can help by reading it back and by asking questions like: "So then what happened?" or "What about the bad pirate?" Be careful not to "steal" the story by making too many suggestions. Children might take your contributions as criticisms, and end up feeling as if they've failed.

The team story. This is a good party game. Ask your child and some friends to form a circle and take turns making up one big story together. If the children are shy, you can start it off. Keep going until everyone has had a turn or the story feels finished, then read it back with gusto. You'll be surprised by how much fun this is.

Playtime. Young children spend much of their free time pretending they are other people — superheroes, princesses, astronauts. Creating a play is a natural literary form for children. Have your child (perhaps with some friends) dictate a play or story to you. When it is finished, the children can act it out. Let them change the play as they act it out, if they wish.

"Publication." Just like adult authors, children write to entertain themselves, but they also like to have other people appreciate their work. There are many ways to "publish" your children's writing. You can put it up on a bulletin board or the refrigerator. You can type it, read it aloud, or photocopy it and give it to family, friends and teachers. You can also make a child's writing into little books (with illustrations by the author) and keep them on a special shelf.

It is perfectly all right to take dictation from your child even after they can write on their own. As long as children enjoy the experience, it is good for the development of their writing.

Writing for School

Much of your child's writing will be done at school. One way to help your child enjoy school writing is to take an interest in it. Give special praise for those compositions based on imaginative assignments — stories, poems, etc. — because these are the sort your child is most likely to want to try doing independently.

If a child enjoys writing in school, provide the time and space at home to continue writing and encourage imaginative experiments. If your child is bored by school writing assignments, try to find ways of making them more interesting. Say the assignment is to answer the question "What is love?" One way of answering is to be wacky: "Love is a school bus full of rutabagas." Another is to be honest: "I don't know what love is. Sometimes I hate the people I am supposed to love...." Remember, many teachers like surprising responses.

Writing at Home

Many children begin writing on their own at home simply because it is fun. For some this is a natural outgrowth of writing with their parents. Other children need encouragement.

The first thing you should do to encourage your child to write at home is provide the basics that all writers need, young or old:

- The tools of the trade: paper, pencils and pens; if possible a typewriter or computer.
- A place to write that is comfortable and quiet.
- Time enough not only to write but to look for inspiration by daydreaming and letting the imagination wander.

You can make writing special by allowing your child to use your desk, your typewriter or computer, or just your favorite pen. You can fold several sheets of typing paper in half, staple the folded edge, and say, "Here is an empty book, ready to be filled!"

Don't be pushy. Encouraging your child to write is a delicate matter. Many children react to pressure by becoming afraid of failure. Many children don't want to write because they're afraid of making spelling mistakes. Tell children that when they write poems and stories for themselves, they don't have to spell everything right. Only when children are ready to revise or publish their writing do they need to go over spelling, punctuation, etc. School homework is a required activity for children, but writing poems and stories at home ought to be voluntary — suggested only as a way of having fun. Children will write a lot if they enjoy it.

HAVING FUN WITH WRITING

If your children already like to write at home, it is probably best not to meddle. Children will enjoy writing more if they feel that it is really their own. But if they ask for help, or you see that they are running out of inspiration, here are a few ideas you could try:

• **Riddles.** Ask your child to describe something without revealing what the thing is. Example: "I come from a land where everything is upside-down. I have a pocket but I don't wear clothes. I have four legs but I don't walk. What am I?" (*Answer: a kangaroo.*) Writing riddles improves children's ability to describe accurately.

• **Apologies.** Suggest that your child write a series of apologies for wild offenses. Example: "I'm sorry I told your mother that a pack of meat-eating butterflies had eaten your little sister, but I couldn't think of anything else to say and I didn't know she'd believe me." To make a surprising apology, your children will have to visualize a situation vividly.

• **Impossible day.** Suggest that your child write a story about a day when only impossible things happened. Example: "While my father was riding his crayon, a camel flew in and kissed my mother on the cheek." The more impossible, the better. The joy of this type of story is that it invites children to search their minds for startling words and combinations.

• **First sentences.** Help your child start a story by providing a first sentence that sets up a strange or intriguing situation. For example: "On Saturday morning I noticed a flower beginning to grow out of the center of my forehead." Or, "When we reached the mountaintop, we found a rope hanging from the sky." It takes creative and connected thinking to make an attractive story out of such ideas.

• **Photostories.** Suggest that children flip through a magazine until they find an interesting photograph. Then, have them write a story (without reading the caption or article) that describes what happened before, during and after the photograph was taken. This idea also works well with paintings and family photographs, particularly if they are of people or places the children have never known. Whatever the subject matter, the story will help your children think logically and creatively about events.

• **Dialogues.** Suggest that your child write a conversation between two related objects, like a pencil and paper, a fork and meat, their own feet and the sidewalk. How would it feel to be the floor? How would it feel to be feet? Creating dialogues helps children think about the ways objects or ideas are linked.

YOUR RESPONSE TO YOUR CHILD'S WRITING

Your response to your children's writing is all-important. If you are proud of what they have written at home or at school, they will also be proud and will want to do more. If you are indifferent or too critical, they will find writing much more difficult.

• First point out what you like in your child's writing. Praising children's strengths is a much more effective way of helping them to write well than pointing out weaknesses. You can always find something to praise. Be specific and honest. If you praise everything uniformly, your praise will lose its effect.

• Be very gentle with your criticisms, especially with beginning writers. Always introduce your concerns after some praise. Remember that your main purpose is not to turn the child into a Shakespeare, but to encourage the child to enjoy writing. As long as children keep writing, they will improve.

• Praise what is unique or unexpected in your child's work, even if it seems a bit out of place, for it is in such unconventional parts that children are often truest to their own way of seeing things. If children feel free to be "different," they are much more likely to value writing as a mode of genuine self-expression.

• Don't worry if your child wants to write only about super-heroes or puppies. A child who enjoys writing will inevitably move on to other topics.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative *was founded by a group of writers and educators in 1967 to send writers into schools and to publish and distribute materials about teaching writing. T&W writers work with children and teachers, giving them an understanding and appreciation of literary traditions and a sense of the methods and motives of writers. T&W houses the Center for Imaginative Writing, a resource library and meeting place. For more information write:*

Teachers and Writers Collaborative
5 Union Square West, New York, New York 10003

Stephen O'Connor and William Bryant Logan developed this brochure.

The National Endowment for the Arts, *an independent federal agency, was founded by Congress in 1965 to foster excellence in the arts throughout the United States, to help broaden the public's understanding of the arts and provide broader access to the nation's rich cultural resources. NEA's Arts in Education Program focuses on increasing and improving arts programs in the nation's schools. For more information write: Arts in Education, National Endowment for the Arts, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20506*

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